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ABSTRACT

This paper reacts to public criticism by reassessing the role of Australian public school education. It recounts the philosophical traditions that have separated instruction and teaching professionals from the realities of the present economy. The paper concludes by suggesting that not only is public input into curricular reform needed, but that there is urgent need for dialogue and joint planning between school policymakers and college of education professors. (JAM)

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Community Expectations and the Secondary
School Years

by

C. W. Collins

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WHAT DO WE EXPECT OF EDUCATION?

*Selected papers from the Twenty-fourth Annual Conference of
The Australian College of Education
held in Sydney, 15-20 May 1983*

R. Philips and A.G. Shannon

Editors

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The Australian College of Education
Carlton, Victoria
1983

COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS AND THE SECONDARY SCHOOL YEARS

C. W. COLLINS

I have been struck by the tone in which public opinion is mentioned. The public is seen as an unfigurable entity of some kind, the influence of which on schools we must all learn to accept and do our best with. I would like to challenge the general thinking about the proper way for professionals to view the relationship between public opinion and schooling.

The rise in studies of public opinion about secondary schooling is a phenomenon we need to examine carefully in itself. Why are we suddenly interested in what everyone thinks of high schools? For a good century educators and politicians made policies for public schools without resorting to plebiscites or other careful measures of public opinion. Nor in my twelve years experience as a child in an Adelaide private school, do I recall any discussion about the purposes of schooling and what the public wanted. Yet, since the mid-70s, we have had a spate of such studies directed at employers, parents, school leavers and so on. Why are we suddenly interested in views of 'outsiders', of non-professionals?

I would like to suggest that the interest in what the public in general wants from schools arises in large part because we feel vulnerable. We are attacked first by student dissatisfaction within and second by the press and prominent individuals from without. In addition, we no longer have defence structures that will withstand such attacks.

For many years before the '70s, professionals in schools worked in a relatively sheltered environment. We had a long period of prosperity during which most secondary students could be induced to sit through hours of pretty unexciting seat work by the prospect of a certificate which, we could truthfully say, would have high instrumental value for their lives. Those students who refused to play that game could be eased out to begin life's education through a job.

The orientation of schools towards a bookish ritual and a certificate had an internal logic as long as there were high rewards beyond the school for the average and above average child. Now, however, the labour market for young people is out of kilter with the school system: there are nowhere near enough jobs and we have severe inflation in the educational certification required for the kinds of jobs the average child used to enter. Thus the intrinsic meaninglessness of much school work is revealed, and so is the lack of any real relationship between that school work and the tasks involved in life beyond the school. The hurdle-setting ritual is exposed for what it is. Not surprisingly, therefore, we have major problems of disinterest and resistance from numbers of students in schools.

Attacks from outside on what the school is doing are too well known to require documentation. Some conservative organizations and individuals were, for a while, almost making careers out of discrediting schools after the recession started.

Less obvious is the fact that the major political alliance which once protected the traditional secondary school is now not really in a position to do so. This alliance consisted of a single state university, a single public-school bureaucracy and a small group of elite private schools in each state. Instead of that single state university we developed, during the '60s, a multiplicity of tertiary institutions. Their faculties are far from unanimous about what they want from entering students. Indeed, in many cases they are rivalling each other in attempts to maintain or increase numbers. They are hardly in a position to protect the old bookish school. Further, the gradual demise of public examinations in many states has taken away the basic mechanism by which such protection, such influence over the heart of the curriculum, used to be maintained.

* The bureaucracies of the state systems are hardly bulwarks against change either. From the late '60s, the School and Community Movement, an anti-bureaucratic movement backed by influential professionals and parents, raised doubts about the legitimacy of centralized control. The School and Community Movement was not interested in the views of the public in general but in the transfer of power to professionals and parents at the local school level. Their arguments, together with the discomfort of being in the hot seat in an era of school-bashing, have been enough to precipitate the devolution of some responsibility, if not power, out of head office. The curriculum has been the major matter devolved onto the local school: the centrally set curriculum no longer exists in some parts of Australia and only partially remains elsewhere. Central management is refusing to play the role of the guardian of the traditional secondary school. Two of the three members of the old alliance are no longer in line.

Thus, the secondary school is vulnerable to pressures from within and without. It is open to scrutiny and not just there and accepted. It is relatively unprotected. This is an uncomfortable situation for most professionals because we are accustomed to well defined operational limits and to conformity between schools. We are not accustomed to having to justify what we are doing. Indeed, I would argue that Australian schools have not had to justify themselves since before the First World War and most professional training has not educated teachers in ways which help them think through such justification. Vulnerability is a fact of life.

What has this got to do with our interest in public opinion? A great deal, I think. Public opinion potentially offers us guidelines for curriculum direction. It can be used in a variety of ways to help us in our vulnerable situation. Our instinct to turn to public opinion at the moment is, I would argue, basically sound. Yet for public opinion to be of value to schools we need to think a lot harder both about the nature of such opinion and about how we, as professionals, ought to respond to it. So far our approaches seems all too frequently to have swung between naivety and abuse. We have a lot to learn about responding wisely to outside pressure groups and I would like, in the rest of this paper, to suggest some guidelines for our pilgrimage towards that wisdom. Let me begin by discussing tempting abuses of deliberate studies of public opinion like the expectations studies in which I have been involved.

A major temptation for professionals seeking deliberately to ascertain community expectations is to use public opinion studies as a defence against what I would regard as necessary changes in power structures in schools. Public opinion studies keep one in touch with the grassroots, indeed allow the virtuous glow of feeling that the "community", whatever that is, has been consulted in an age when pressure for better school and community links is strong. But at the same time, this kind of consultation keeps decision making in the same old hands rather than genuinely devolving it out of the bureaucracy and into the safe keeping of the local school community.

There is a major difference, as Leonie Sandercock (1978) has pointed out, between participation through market research and locally based, client participation in decision making. One is compatible with bureaucratic habits while the other requires genuine changes in the power structure. Is it a coincidence that we have all these public opinion studies at a time when we are mouthing the rhetoric of real community power?

The second temptation with such deliberate studies of public opinion is to use them to defend ourselves and to help us feel comfortable with the status quo. One can indeed find in expectations studies evidence of more public support for schools, even for state secondary schools, than one would expect from reading the daily press. And those who know the schools best, parents and others closely associated with

them, give strongest support (See Botsman and Browne (1977) as well as Collins and Hughes (1978)).

Further, such studies show that the major issues raised by the press — the basics and academic standards — are not the areas of concern to those who know schools well. They can, therefore, provide useful ammunition in defence of our professional competence at the school's traditional tasks. However, if we construct and use them honestly, public opinion studies will also reveal major public anxieties. Indeed they raise problems more frequently than they give comfort. An honest survey, honestly analysed, rarely gives grounds only for self-congratulation.

There is also the temptation to construct public opinion surveys in the first place so that questions likely to give the public a chance to express their major concerns are simply omitted and replaced by carefully structured side issues. (This has happened at least once in the A.C.T. to my knowledge.) Both the less-than-honest survey and the less-than-honest use of selected survey results need to be exposed for what they are — propaganda exercises by professionals to support themselves.

Perhaps the most common temptation, however, applies equally to unplanned as well as planned exposure to public opinion and it is to swing to the opposite extreme from the defence of the status quo. Schools and school systems which felt battered from within by student pressure and from without by an ungrateful public have often rushed into action to rectify what the latest press story or survey claimed to reveal about the schools' failure.

It is not the proper task of the school to simply respond submissively to the demands which any group in society chooses to place on it. The extent to which we have taken on this masochistic role over the last decade is an indication of how weak and vulnerable we have felt, rather than a sign of good schooling. Acting precipitately on the basis of what someone argues is 'public opinion' or 'the community's expectations' is unlikely to be in the best interests of schools and children. Schools in the '70s were buffeted by every wind that blew from powerful sectors of society. This was debilitating for teachers, placed too many disparate small tasks on schools and was not obviously any more helpful to children than the old curriculum. In my view schools need not and ought not to have responded so willingly to the pressures from, for example, certain employer lobby groups during those years. The willingness to give in to pressure, on the grounds that this is what the community wants, also shows a surprising level of naiveté about the nature of public opinion. Let me expand on this naiveté point and, through it, return to the broader issue.

It is naive, first, to believe that there is public agreement on directions for change. The press has a series of standard ways of making the views of one or two sound like the views of many. But schools are foolish if they believe such kite flying. Careful analysis of public opinion shows that there is no clear consensus in society about directions for change in secondary schooling. There is surprisingly strong agreement about what is wrong with secondary schools but a great variety of views on what should be done about it. Some prominent academics want a greater emphasis on traditional academic disciplines and standards; some employers want to orient secondary schools towards the basics, practical skills and respectful attitudes; while many parents want schools to become more concerned with helping students to grow and develop into mature persons. Students themselves, on average, have slightly different priorities from parents and very different ones from well-publicised academics and industrial lobby groups. Studies of those closest to schools — parents, students, recent school leavers — suggest directions for change which might be possible with good-will, time and a great deal of school-client discussions. At the moment, however, there is no agreement which a clever politician could not undo in a few choice sentences. Those who expect public opinion to be uni-directional and to give a clear blue-print for change are fooling themselves.

Another reason why it seems naive to act in haste in response to 'public opinion' is that it shows an over-innocent faith in the commitment of people in action to the ideals they profess in words. We have clear evidence over the last eight years that the schools' clients are much more complex persons than such faith allows for. During the very years when school client studies have been indicating dissatisfaction with the bookish secondary curriculum, we have had something of a flight by parents from the level of reform already operating in public schools to private schools offering the very traditional bookish, academic approach which, in pencil and paper studies, they do not want. In tight economic times, people are unlikely to offer their children up to an experimental secondary curriculum when they see the old one as better understood by employers and more acceptable to the few remaining choosy, elite and conservative professional university faculties like medicine and law. We must not confuse people's best hopes for an ideal school with their willingness to support such a school in the real world of today.

Being naive about public opinion in the above ways — envisaging it as a potentially unanimous guiding voice — also puts us off facing several crucial tasks. One of those is a political task. By pretending that people know unambiguously what they want and that what one wants all will want, we have avoided the important task for us as professionals of thinking through who in the community has the right to major influence in schools. I believe that schools are there to look after the best interests of children, to protect their right to know and their right to full lives. If necessary the guardians of the school may have to protect those rights against pressure from those groups in society with lesser goals in view for schools. If we care about children we cannot allow everyone the right to use the school curriculum for their own ends. Who in the community is most likely to care that children develop fully and to join us as good guardians of schools? We must face this question in a realistic way if we are both to improve the secondary school and at the same time decrease its vulnerability to less-than-altruistic pressures.

One of the most important things I have learned from studying the history of American schools is that the way one structures access to influence over schools and who obtains that influence matters a great deal. America has a 350-year history of community involvement in schools and we have much to learn from it. American schools, about 90 years ago, began consolidating small urban school districts run by boards of citizens into whole city systems run by boards of citizens. These new structures had, and continue to have, very clear outcomes when compared with the old structures, in terms of who, in the public, influences school policies. Such city-wide structures favour the well-organized and powerful in society — the middle-class with city-wide constituencies in general and the business community (chambers of manufacturers and commerce) in particular. The same structures have made minority groups and ordinary parents without connections and concerned about their child in a local school, relatively helpless. The new structures had clear effects on the curriculum. Conservatives like Arthur Bestor in the 1940s and radicals like Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in the 1970s would all agree, for example, that the general paradigm governing American urban schools in the 20th century has been one which sees children as raw materials to be moulded and shaped (gently and without traumatic damage) to fit into existing imperfect American business and societal structures. There has been a slide away from intellectual ends, the discipline of understanding, and towards 'social integration' to use Passow's term, or 'social control', to use a more radical one.

To return to Australia, it is naive to think that we are going to please all groups in society or accommodate all demands on schools. As the old alliance between university and bureaucracy has broken down (and I think that is a good thing), we need now to make conscious decisions about who our new allies will be and how we shall organize ourselves to ensure the best influences over schools rather than the

influence of any well-organized group which cannot resist rushing into a power vacuum. Who is most likely to have the best interests of children at heart and at the same time, as a group, can wield strong political clout? Go back to your state parents and citizens organizations and ask them!

Turning to parents as allies is not easy for many teachers, particularly those brought up in state school traditions. What is involved is an end to the old mentality which envisaged schools as rescuing children from the lesser culture and language of their homes. Parents were precisely the people against which the old alliance in Australia was used. We need a rapid development in understanding by teachers of the educational futility of keeping parents out and the political and educational importance of building good alliances with them at the local school level. They are the people with a basic and absolute right to influence the school curriculum, the people most likely to keep in mind the genuine interests of children and the people who together can make a strong political force. It is primarily with parents that we should discuss school aims and clarify mutual expectations, seeking, in a professional manner, to persuade when we honestly think they are on the wrong track, but always genuinely listening, respecting and working alongside them, encouraging them to be, along with teachers, the schools' guardians.

This brings me to the other task we are avoiding by being naive about public opinion. We are tempted to treat it globally because to go beyond denying its validity on the one hand or rushing to implement it on the other demands of us, as professionals, a lot of hard thinking about the proper purposes of schooling. We are not used to such fundamental thinking. For several generations we have been locked into an instrumental view of our task and into the comfortable assumption that the curriculum handed down from on high could be, indeed was, value free. We were told to think about the how, not about the range of possible aims and their links to the social context of schooling. We learned that lesson too well and now find it both scary and somehow improper to think beyond the how to the broader issues. It is therefore tempting to allow 'public opinion' to do that thinking for us, to delude ourselves either that what we are now doing is still valid or that outside events or persons are going to tell us what to do.

One is struck by such delusions in reading professional curriculum documents such as the latest ACT Green Paper on curriculum. The document fails utterly to argue a fundamental position about what schools are for. Instead it talks vaguely about rapid societal change and quotes several disparate sources (unacknowledged) generally implying that powers beyond the school are forcing a variety of inevitable curricular directions. What we needed instead was some intelligent professional input into the curricular debate. Professionals have a duty to think harder and more carefully about schooling than other sectors of society. No one else knows more than you do and you should not allow the schools to simply drift with the tide and the storms. If they are so drifting, there is nothing inevitable about it. They are drifting because we have chosen to let them, failed to develop good aims for schools in the current frightening world, failed to develop those aims in dialogue with others who care about the next generation.

In order to convince you that public opinion won't relieve educators of their difficult thinking task, let me sketch out, in broad terms, what one finds underlying community expectations of secondary schools in Australia. One finds the intertwining of five historic traditions of thinking about what schools are for. The first public opinion study with which I was involved (Collins and Hughes, 1978) picked these traditions up rather tentatively. They have become clearer in my own understanding of what the public is saying since that time. These five traditions are the Academic, the Social Control, the Industrial, the Personal Development and the Social Reconstruction traditions.

* The Academic tradition is familiar to you — schools are there to introduce children to disciplines which universities take seriously (or to those disciplines which universities took seriously at the turn of the century).

I have already mentioned the Social Control tradition. Readers of radical educational literature of the last ten years will recognise it. Schools are there to teach children that whatever bad things happen to them in life are their own fault (low I.Q., poor home background) and that they should submit to authority without rebellion. Institutionalized children are tamed children. There is a strong element of this tradition, to which we need to be alert, in the desire to get unemployed youth back into schools.

The Industrial traditional is very strong in Australia, perhaps stronger than anywhere else in the Western world. Schooling should lead to jobs. Schools are there to provide the skills which employers want. It is a tradition which has tainted even academic subjects for these tend not to be valued intrinsically for the knowledge and understanding they give, but because they lead to university entrance and high status jobs. It was by inverse logic within the Industrial tradition that schools got blamed for unemployment. Ironically, perhaps unemployment is now helping many to see beyond that view and to see that schooling cannot be built around it alone.

The Personal Development tradition grew slowly during the last century and rapidly in this one. It argues that children, if placed in good environments, grow naturally in their minds and spirits as well as in their bodies. This belief, augmented by Freudian insight and by the science of child development has become a powerful influence over child rearing in homes and schools. Schools are there to provide stimulating learning environments and to foster the development of students as individual persons (the question of ends is usually avoided).

Finally there is the Social Reconstruction tradition, though I don't mean social reconstruction in its strong, propaganda sense. Rather, I mean the tradition that schools are there to teach truth and respect for truth, so that the next generation will be better, stronger, less prejudiced than the last and through the generations we can build a better society and a better world. Schools are there to help students understand themselves, the world and life itself. This view has strong links with public schooling and with some of the best traditions of private schooling (for example, William Godwin's (1971) hesitations in the early 19th century about state involvement in education because he feared that the state would be tempted to use schools for its own ends rather than encourage schools to foster truth).

What does this have to do with professional responsibility and public opinion studies? A great deal I think. We can find all these five historic traditions in what the 'public' says. What one gets from public opinion is a surface manifestation of the relative balance of these traditions in particular groups at particular times under particular media and other influences. Some people live entirely within just one or two of them. For a lot of our history we tried to confine working class education to the Industrial and Social Control traditions and many still see schools in those terms only. Some people, most people probably, are contradictory, thinking in one tradition one day and its opposite the next. Some, like an employer we met, want one tradition for their own children but another for those who will work on the factory floor.

Further, these traditions have a political history and a political life. The Academic tradition has given great advantages to middle class children brought up within the language and thinking rituals required. Pierre Bourdieu (1976) has spent a decade giving us overwhelming evidence of this and the Paris riots of the last few weeks show how right he is. The Industrial and Social Control traditions, too, obviously bestow great benefits on some in society and much lesser benefits on others.

Thus public opinion studies, or the press, may expose the balance of traditions in a particular group today. But I do not see that this tells us what we as professionals ought to do in schools. Rather, I think it is crucial for us to think hard about all five traditions, to discard the worst, to recover what is best from all of them and to become politically active in the service of that best. We have an obligation to seize on the good elements in a contradictory hegemony and to try to promote that best, if necessary, against the opposition of those who benefit from a lesser view of schooling and of the rights of all children.

I would like to finish by referring briefly to what I see as the balance of public opinion about secondary schooling at the moment and what that means in terms of actions professionals perhaps should take. This is a *coda* for those of you who want some substantive data rather than a paper of pure argument! For, of course, I don't see public opinion as unimportant. I am concerned rather, that it not be treated indiscriminately but properly weighed by parents and professionals against a clear sense of the best interests of children and that we insiders take responsibility for what we absorb and what we reject.

I have been involved in three studies of community expectations: a study of parents, students and teachers in secondary schools (Collins and Hughes, *Expectations of Secondary Schools*, 1978); a study of their post-school years (tertiary counsellors, workers with unemployed youth, personnel managers in large firms) and of youth who could look back at their secondary schooling across a few years' post-school experience (Collins *et al.*, *Looking Backwards*, 1980); and recently, an A.C.T. study of parents of final year primary school (Collins *et al.*, *Facing the Secondary School Years*, 1983). Two of these studies help us to understand the topography of opinions of 'insiders', those whom I regard as legitimate decision-makers on secondary schools. The *Looking Backwards* study, by contrast, was an attempt to find outsiders whose experiences and reflections might have given them a particular wisdom of value to secondary school decision-makers.

While there is no real agreement about directions for change among those tapped by these studies and others conducted elsewhere, there is a considerable measure of concern about the same aspects of secondary schooling. First, there is widespread concern that too much emphasis is placed on 'bookish knowledge'. Much of the curriculum is experienced by students as irrelevant. Moreover, the emphasis on traditional subjects has had ripple effects across the whole way the school is organized and operates. It affects the status and viability of other subjects no matter how intrinsically valuable they are. It also affects perceptions of students in the institution. Those students who were not academically competent in traditional ways felt themselves to be less valuable and less valued as persons.

The most commonly felt lack in the curriculum is its failure to give practical skills and know-how required for adult life. For most respondents, however, that know-how in itself would not be sufficient to constitute good schooling. They want schools to be involved in the development of persons who have high self esteem, can think clearly, relate comfortably to others and generally have the ability to look after their own interests and cope with life. Indeed the general thrust of studies of the opinions of those close to schools suggests an upsurge in the Personal Development tradition, a new and I think commendable awareness of adolescents as persons at a particular stage in life who need to be helped to find out who they are, and how they might grow towards a responsible, satisfying life in difficult times. Schooling was seen as currently having little to do with these urgent matters.

Only a small group placed this general concern for personal development and practical skills in a broader context. Those who did, argued the case which has been put so well in the Schools Commission (1980) document *Schooling for 15-16 year*

olds. They argued for at least some of the secondary years being detached from tertiary study and treated as years of initiation into adult life. A good secondary education would provide practical skills and help with personal development. These were very important. But it would not stop there. These people felt strongly, and rightly so I think, about the Social Reconstruction tradition. Adult life involves taking part in a democratic system. Students don't just need the basics, or to have self confidence and skills in looking after their own immediate interests. They need to understand social issues and to have some perspectives on the society in which they live. They need to be able to participate rather than simply be acquiescent plebians or self-serving employees in structures they don't understand.

The views we have tapped then fall rather into three groups. First, there are those who remain within a fairly simple Industrial plus Social Control tradition. Second, we have those who accept aspects of these two traditions but add and emphasize the Personal Development one. And third, there are those who accept aspects of all these three but add and emphasize the 'truth', or Social Reconstruction, tradition. The Academic tradition hardly gets mentioned in this ideal world, when you ask people what they would really like in a secondary school curriculum; but it is, of course, very influential in real decisions by parents about their children's schooling.

I think one can discern, in the mix of what people say they really want from secondary schools, the basis for dialogue and constructive change. There is common agreement, in theory at least, that schools need to be less bookish and more connected with the realities of adult life and with practical matters. This common thread is expressed very simply by some, seen within a rather broader yet individualistic context by others, and viewed in a total societal context by others yet again. This suggests that the wise place to start rethinking the secondary curriculum is around the 'real life' thread.

Further, a narrow anti-intellectualism is not the majority view. Most people have moved beyond the confines of the Industrial and Social Control traditions to a concern about the Personal Development of children (their own children at least). The majority view has moved to a kind of Progressivism in which there is a considerable focus upon students as developing individual persons with intellectual and social needs and a need to be helped to develop good values and personal strength. There is much merit in this and a great deal for schools to build on.

While changing the curriculum is going to be difficult and take considerable time, thought and dialogue, there is another simpler place at which we can begin changing secondary schools right now: we can change the school environment into one which is caring of adolescents, in which staff are able to get to know and take an interest in individual students. Almost all respondents in public opinion studies have been concerned about the school as a place in which adolescents must spend their growing up years. There would be no opposition to changes in school power and responsibility structures and pastoral care structures provided that order and good work orientations are maintained. ~~These~~ would be no opposition, either, to changing structures so that parents are properly involved. Solving the structural problems of schools, changing these *internal* traditions is a place we can make immediate improvements and is possibly a prerequisite for formal curricular changes anyway.

Let me end by pointing to another area where change is possible and necessary and which might be a particularly appropriate area of work for this College. There is an urgent need for dialogue between schools and elite faculties of universities and CAEs about the basis for admission to those faculties. The current arrangements encourage 'bookish' approaches in schools. They force parents to be ambivalent about any curricular change which they quite clearly see as intrinsically better but perhaps instrumentally worse, affecting a child's chances to 'get to the top'. Moreover, the

traditional curriculum and its links to elite faculties favours children from certain home backgrounds and schools, not necessarily those who would make the best professionals.

If we could break the current secondary-elite faculty link it would be easier to create an intellectually better curriculum, one that is genuinely concerned with the development of intelligent, knowledgeable persons rather than with bookish rituals. We could also work for a just curriculum for all children and one that connects with all their realities, not just with the background of a few. This is a challenge worthy of the Australian College of Education, the most appropriate forum in Australia for dialogue between educational professionals at all levels and from all education sectors.

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